

AIR WAR COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

ROOTS RUNNING DEEP
ARMS SALES AND RUSSIA'S EXCURSION INTO SYRIA

by

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Biography

Colonel Raymond G. Millero Jr. is assigned to the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL. He graduated from the United States Air Force Academy in 1995 with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Biochemistry. He has served as an F-16 evaluator and instructor pilot, and held various leadership positions, including commander of the 79th Fighter Squadron. Colonel Millero has also served in two joint staff assignments, is a graduate of the USAF Weapons Instructor Course, and has completed a Masters in Business Administration and a Masters of Strategic Intelligence. Colonel Millero has over 3200 flying hours and has deployed in support of Operations SOUTHERN WATCH twice, NOBLE EAGLE, NEW DAWN, and ENDURING FREEDOM.



Abstract

Reminiscent of the Soviet era, military arms exports have once again become a major instrument for projecting Russian power and influence, and are integral in bolstering a fragile economy and offsetting the damages caused by Western sanctions. Russia's involvement in the Syrian War on behalf of Bashar Al-Assad indicates a growing primacy of Putin's willingness to take calculated risks within the Russian sphere of influence and to use military exports as a political tool to achieve national security interests. In Syria, Russia utilized its military exports to enhance its image as a world power, maintain access, and counter Western influence in the Middle East. In addition to sending advanced weaponry to Syria, Russia showcased its military hardware against Western made weapons, sending a clear signal of Russian reliability and sophistication to nations wanting to upgrade, purchase or diversify their military inventory.

The state owned and controlled Russian defense industry remains a fundamental instrument of national power and supports the achievement of Putin's national security goals. Military sales represents an important aspect to understanding the potential for future Russian adventurism. Hence, future Russian military expansion in what it considers its sphere of influence, with Putin's goal to reemerge as a great power, can be anticipated through looking at Russia's defense export sales. The inextricable link between foreign military sales and the achievement of Russia's national security interests is an important aspect in avoiding the next strategic surprise.

Thesis

This paper argues that Russia has returned to a pseudo-Soviet style practice of utilizing arms sales as a political instrument to further its national security objectives. Moreover, this paper argues part of Russia's decision to commit forces into Syria was to showcase their military hardware to the world, thereby renewing interest in purchasing arms. This, in turn, provided Russia additional opportunities to expand their influence and counter the West. Finally, this paper argues there is an inextricable link between foreign military sales and the potential for future Russian adventurism. Understanding this link is an important aspect to avoid strategic surprise the next time Russia commits military forces in its self-proclaimed sphere of influence.



Introduction

Russia is amid a deepening economic crisis caused by low oil prices, the falling ruble, and Western sanctions imposed over Russia's actions in Ukraine. Despite this grim economic outlook, Russia continues to advance its goal to become a world power. Reminiscent of the Soviet era, military arms exports have once again become a major instrument for projecting Russian power and influence, and are integral in bolstering a fragile economy and offsetting the damages caused by Western sanctions. Russia's involvement in the Syrian War on behalf of Bashar Al-Assad indicates a growing primacy of Putin's willingness to take calculated risks within the Russian sphere of influence and to use military exports as a political tool to achieve national security interests. In Syria, Russia utilized its military exports to enhance its image as a world power, maintain access, and counter Western influence in the Middle East. In addition to sending advanced weaponry to Syria, Russia showcased its military hardware against Western made weapons, sending a clear signal of Russian reliability and sophistication to nations wanting to upgrade, purchase or diversify their military inventory.

This paper examines the defense export industry's role in the formulation of policy from the Soviet era to the present. Specifically, this paper discusses the economic and political factors resulting from the consolidation of the defense industry under state control, arguing Russia has returned to a pseudo-Soviet style practice of utilizing arms sales as a political instrument to further its national security objectives. Following this discussion, this paper investigates the effects of Russia's sale of weapons and military operations in Syria. During this particular discussion, this paper examines Russia's geopolitical influence over the arms export industry and its importance in achieving Putin's vision to restore Russia as a great power. Moreover, this paper argues part of Russia's decision to commit forces into Syria was to showcase their military

hardware to the world, thereby renewing interest in purchasing arms. This, in turn, provided Russia additional opportunities to expand their influence and counter the West. Finally, this paper investigates the resultant effect of increased interest in Russian military hardware and technology as a result of Russia's successful military campaign in Syria. The corresponding strategic effect cannot be ignored, as Russia continues to look for opportunities to expand its strategic influence and bolster its economy through outreach in the lucrative arms market.

Coming Full Circle: The Return of Foreign Military Sales as a Political Tool

During the Soviet Era, the USSR adhered to a fundamental policy of selling military arms to anti-Western aligned states to spread Communist ideology, gain a sphere of influence and balance power in a bi-polar world.¹ With the fall of the Soviet Union and the resultant privatization of the military industrial complex and export companies, the newly formed Russian Government under Yeltsin had limited capability and means to directly influence the sale of Russian military equipment and technology. However, under Putin, the consolidation of the military industrial complex under state control has reinvigorated Russia's ability to use military sales as part of its grand strategy. Through its arms exports, Russia has returned to its Soviet ways by advancing its foreign policy objectives to expand its sphere of influence and take advantage of anti-West governments' sentiment to further its goal to reemerge as a world power.

The Soviet Union's national security strategy and communist ideology guided the requirements to build up its defense against the threat of capitalism and the United States. Hence, the primary reason for export sales during the Cold War was primarily political rather than financial.² Soviet foreign weapons sales were a principle means of assuring foreign allies' loyalty, countering the West and expanding the communist ideology.³ In order to keep pace with the West, the Soviet leadership demanded a large defense force and extensive military

production which drove the defense industry. Through massive state funding, the defense industry was able to thrive during the heart of the Cold War period. However, as the Soviet economy slowly eroded, the defense industry began to see less funding from the state. The eventual and resultant collapse of the Soviet economy triggered a transformation in the defense industry, as Russia converted to a market economy and a vast number of defense companies became privatized.

Under Yeltsin, as the Russian economy continued to decline, the newly privatized defense industry became increasingly divorced from Russian foreign policy aims. As a result of privatization, weapons sales during the 1990s were overwhelmingly driven by private interests to gain revenue for the ailing defense industries, offset unit costs and support the defense industrial base.⁴ Due to lack of state support and control, the Russian defense enterprise prioritized seeking revenue over any Russian security concerns during this period. A salient example was a 1995 US \$1.4 billion contract with China, which transferred technology and licenses for production of SUKHOI Su-27 fighter aircraft.⁵ Although China was seen as a regional rival and potential future adversary to Russia, the privatized defense industry relied on these lucrative deals to maintain their viability, which outweighed any national security concerns of the Russian leadership. Moreover, similar deals with India and Iran were also conducted with little regard for political concerns.⁶ The much needed export sales to China, India, and Iran returned hard currency into the privatized defense industry, maintained production lines and prevented the possible collapse of the defense industry.

Although the privatized defense firms were able to overcome significant problems in their transition to a market economy despite the lack of state support, the bulk of defense restructuring was made when Vladimir Putin became President of the Russian Federation. The

defense reforms initiated by Putin, along with surging natural energy prices and growing arms export sales during the early 2000s, gave renewed focus and resurrected the ailing defense industry.⁷ Putin began to take control of the vital economic sectors by striking at the oligarchs who opposed economic reform. Putin specifically targeted those who controlled the media, banks, oil, and defense industries. As Putin gained more control over the vital sectors of the economy, he was able to leverage these industries to advance Russia's national interests.

Overcoming Problems within the Defense Industry

When Putin became President in 2000, in the face of declines in both domestic procurement and foreign sales, Russian defense industry lobbyists argued that the total collapse of the defense sector would be disastrous for the country.⁸ The impact of the expected loss of jobs would be particularly severe in some regions and localities where defense industries were often the sole enterprise. The defense companies in these localities were not only responsible for most of the employment in a locality, but also for most of the housing and social services as well.⁹ Defense ministry officials were alarmed at the prospect that the closing of numerous plants and design bureaus could terminate research and development of new technologies, exacerbating the decline of the Russian defense industry.¹⁰

In the view of some Russian military and industry specialists, total collapse could be averted only by means of a systematic effort to rebuild the volume of arms exports.¹¹ However, the worldwide cut in defense budgets, combined with a surplus of weapons on the market, meant the competition for orders of new weapons would be extremely stiff. Nevertheless, defense lobbyists representing the interests of industry managers and the officials in regions where defense manufacturing enterprises were concentrated, succeeding in persuading reformers that the funds needed for conversion of the defense industry could be obtained from foreign sales.¹²

Hence, arms sales became increasingly important in rebuilding the Russian economy and defense sector, and therefore a principal national security concern for Putin.

Putin Consolidates the Defense Industry under State Control

During the transition to a managed democracy under Putin and Medvedev, Russia experienced internal conflict between the ruling elite and the rich oligarchs who came to power during the transition to privatization in the 1990s.¹³ The domestic battles for control over the vital sectors of the economy, including oil and defense, played out in Russia during the 2000s. The result of the domestic conflict was a concerted effort by Putin and Medvedev to consolidate these critical sectors under state control. By consolidating the defense industry under state control, Putin would have greater influence in utilizing military exports to advance Russia's strategic goals.

Subsequently, under the direction Putin, the state began in earnest to consolidate and unify the vast defense military industrial complex. In November 2000, under presidential decree, Putin named Rosoboronexport as the sole state intermediary agency for Russia's military exports and imports of defense related and dual use products, technologies and services.¹⁴ As the sole state agency, Rosoboronexport was charged with implementing the policy of the state in the area of military cooperation between Russia and foreign countries, allowing Russia to control and influence state exports as part of its foreign policy goals. The official status of Rosoboronexport guarantees the support of the Russian government in all export operations, exclusively entitled to supply the international market the whole range of Russian armaments officially allowed for export.¹⁵ As the sole state intermediary agency, Rosoboronexport provides the Russian government with unique opportunities in expanding and strengthening long-term mutually beneficial cooperation with foreign partners, while gaining access and influence in the process.

Russia's defense industry, through the exploits of Rosoboronexport, continues to be an important sector in the Russian economy. The Russian defense industry would have collapsed if not for the success of its defense export program and Russian leadership's renewed emphasis to allocate resources and funding. Arms sales have become the main source of revenue for the defense industry and play a key role in Russia's ongoing attempt to regenerate its own armed forces and bolster research and development initiatives. The consequences of expanding foreign arms sales have a significant impact on Russia's economy and defense industry. Russia's arms export strategy is an integral part of its overall strategy to not only achieve economic stability, but to expand influence and counter Western influence and reemerge as a great power.

The Syrian Connection

Through Rosoboronexport, Putin has asserted state control over arms sales and used politically sensitive deals with nations to increase influence and assert its foreign policy interests.¹⁶ Specifically in Syria, historical political ties and a long history of weapons purchases from Damascus have enabled Russia to sustain a major ally and maintain an important political and military foothold in the Middle East. As evidenced in 2011, Russia had an estimated US \$4 billion worth of outstanding weapons contracts with Damascus.¹⁷ Syria is undoubtedly Russia's most important ally in the region and is a key country for maintaining influence in the region.

Military sales to Syria not only reinforced Russia's commitment to the Assad regime, but ensured the high tech weapons were enough to thwart the United States goal of ousting Bashar Al-Assad. The advanced weapons and training created a prohibitive environment and increased the risk to military forces of the United States. This forced Washington to reevaluate their stated red line, discontinue pursuing military plans to oust Assad, and weakened United States power in the region. The decision by Moscow to support Assad with advanced weaponry guaranteed

Russia had a say in the outcome of the Syrian civil war and galvanized Russia's desire to be seen as a world power in the Middle East.

In addition to contributing sophisticated arms to Syria and bolstering Russia's image as a world power, the military campaign in Syria also provided a showcase for advanced military weaponry and technology. The employment of Russia's fourth generation aircraft, surface-to-air missile systems, cruise missiles, anti-access and denial weapons, and other technologically advanced systems displayed the capability and reliability of Russian equipment in front of a world stage. Nations trying to decide whether to upgrade and/or purchase Russian equipment and technology were impressed with the demonstration of military might during the campaign in Syria.¹⁸ The result was an overwhelming display of sophisticated weapons, which some could argue were not necessarily required for the type of fight in Syria. Consequently, by executing a successful military campaign, Russia was able to realize the strategic goals of its national security agenda, defense and export strategy, and gain power and influence among nations looking for an alternative to Western manufacturers.

The resultant marketing effect from Russia's Syrian campaign has led to renewed interest in arms contracts and a boost in sales totaling \$7 billion, according to sources in the Russian government.¹⁹ Ruslan Pukhov, director of the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, said the Syria operation had affected Russian arms sales "extremely positively" by showing Moscow has effective weapons and can challenge western influence.²⁰ Moreover, Pukhov also stated the Syrian operation provided an "excellent opportunity to show off the goods."²¹ Indeed, the demonstration of military power resulted in renewed interest in Russian arms and contracts with Algeria, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Pakistan. Specifically, Algeria has expressed interest in the purchase of 12 Sukhoi Su-32 aircraft and 40 Mi-28N attack helicopters

after eight years of stalled negotiations.²² Undoubtedly, the Syrian conflict enabled Russia to promote its military products, thereby expanding its political influence to new markets.

The course of events at the end of 2015 and into 2016 created increased opportunity for Russia to expand its arms sales and reinvigorate stalled arms contracts. Prior to the Syrian conflict, there was a perception that Russian arms were of relatively poor quality, resulting in the loss of a number of arms trade customers. However, the successful campaign has done much to counter and assuage these perceptions. The Russian defense industry has managed to gain a foothold in new markets, regain lost positions in a number of countries and continue to develop military-technical cooperation with its traditional partners of China and India. Growing interest among foreign customers, largely due to the Syria campaign, will ensure Russia holds its position in the global arms market and maintain vital political relationships.

Military Sales in Russian Foreign Policy

Russia's policy and military actions in Syria highlighted Moscow's willingness to use military cooperation to expand influence and restore its image as a great power. Russia's actions also signified Russia's emphasis on marketing its weapons to support the defense sector and encourage future export sales. Subsequently, Russia's current policy lies between the extremes of the economic desperation of the Yeltsin era and the geopolitically-driven weapons transfers of the Soviet era.²³ The Soviets conducted foreign policy as 'war by other means' against the West, and arms transfers were a key part of the Soviet strategy.²⁴ During the Yeltsin administration, Russian arms producers focused on foreign sales to survive the lack of a domestic market, with weak central authority resulting in largely uncontrolled exports. Although it is important for the Russian defense industry to sell military equipment in order to generate revenue for the defense industry, the purposeful export of military hardware and technology is part of a bigger goal to

boost Russia's image as a great power, increase areas of influence, open up access to natural resources, and counter the West.

Largely as an inheritance from its Soviet past, Russia has little to export other than arms and raw materials, because it can no longer afford to transfer arms freely as did the Soviet Union for many years. Arms sales are now driven by profits more than purely ideological interests. At the same time, Russia's desire to court favor among anti-Western states is a major factor in its foreign arms sales policy. Even though economic necessity is the fundamental driver behind Russia's promotion of arms sales, it is not at the expense of foreign policy interests. As long as the political price is not prohibitive, Russia will pursue lucrative arms sales, even at the cost of incurring the displeasure of the West. As ideological considerations have yielded to economic interests in arms sales, Russia still continues to mix foreign policy with arms sale contracts. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the oil and gas industry replaced the military industry in importance to the state, however, arms sales still provide important revenue for the state and are considered a valuable instrument in conducting foreign policy.

From the initiatives set forth by Putin, the arms export industry reemerged as one of the primary tools to advance Russia's national security interests. In 2012, Putin himself stated, "We see active military technical cooperation (military exports) as an effective instrument for advancing our national interests, both political and economic. Growing demand for the goods our defense industry and related sectors produce brings more money into our state budget and creates new jobs."²⁵ This statement indicates Putin's desire to not only improve the defense industry and domestic economy, but to advance Russia's political interests through its state arms export program. Hence, Putin's military export strategy is inextricably linked to Russia's overall national security objectives to support its image as a great power, maintain an independent

foreign policy free from Western influence, and expand its own influence and political ties with countries disgruntled or at odds with the West.²⁶

Putin understands the importance of the defense industry and arms trade in reestablishing Russia as a world power. A strong defense industry and prolific export industry not only represents an image of military power, but also helps in balancing Western power by securing defense and security agreements and economically by obtaining resource extraction rights. In order for Russia to maintain and expand its influence, the defense industry must continue to thrive, especially with the relative decline in oil and gas prices. Hence, the survival of Russia's defense industry is increasingly dependent on export sales to emerging and stagnant markets, with countries looking for alternatives to Western manufacturers. In order to gain access and political influence into new markets, Russia has resorted to using economic agreements, barter deals, debt forgiveness, and offset contracts to promote arms sales around the world.²⁷ With these practices, Russia has increased its ability to influence and promote Russian interests.

As the global arms market continues to evolve, incentives instituted by Russia will put it in a position to take advantage of its economic and political influence. Based on recent arms deals with countries like Syria, Algeria, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Vietnam, Russia will continue to accompany future arms deals with diverse economic packages and incentives.²⁸ The importance of offsetting the cost of military equipment and related economic contracts, combined with the successful display of military power in Syria, will likely increase the attractiveness of Russian equipment amid a competitive global arms market. Russia will likely continue to market economic incentives with its arms sales, not only to secure resource extraction rights, but to also expand its influence and boost its image as a great power.

Future Implications of Russia's Adventurism in Syria

Despite all the key indicators, Russia's military adventure in Syria was considered a strategic surprise to the United States and the West. However, the strategic importance of Syria as a political and military partner in the Middle East was somehow overlooked. The importance of Russia maintaining a Mediterranean port and historical ties with Syria should have been the primary determinant in anticipating Russia's excursion. Putin's decision to deploy forces to Syria indicates his willingness to seize the initiative, expand Russian influence and counter the West when opportunities become available when the political risk is relatively low.

The state owned and controlled Russian defense industry remains a fundamental instrument of national power and supports the achievement of Putin's national security goals. Military sales represents an important aspect to understanding the potential for future Russian adventurism. Hence, future Russian military expansion in what it considers its sphere of influence, with Putin's goal to reemerge as a great power, can be anticipated through looking at Russia's defense export sales. The inextricable link between foreign military sales and the achievement of Russia's national security interests is an important aspect in avoiding the next strategic surprise.

Conclusion

Despite a grim economic outlook, Russia continues to advance its goal to become a world power. Reminiscent of the Soviet era, Russia has returned to the policy of utilizing military exports as a major tool for projecting Russian power and influence. Russia's involvement in Syria indicates a growing primacy of Putin's willingness to take calculated risks within the Russian sphere of influence and to use military exports as a political tool to achieve national security interests. In Syria, Russia utilized its military exports to enhance its image as a world power, maintain access, and counter Western influence in the Middle East. In addition to

sending advanced weaponry to Syria, Russia showcased its military hardware against Western made weapons, sending a clear signal of Russian reliability and sophistication to nations wanting to upgrade, purchase or diversify their military inventory.

In summation, Russia was able to accomplish three national security goals with respect to their military involvement in Syria. First, Russia's opportunistic venture demonstrated their resolve to support anti-Western governments in order to achieve its goal to improve its status as a world power. That is, Russia was able to expand its political influence, solidify a military foothold in a key region and showcase its ability to project military power abroad despite objections from the West. Second, Russia arms exports to Syria provided a way to counter Western interference in the region by creating a non-permissible military environment. The selling of advanced weaponry, along with associated training, provided the Syrian regime the military advantage and tipped the balance of military power, thwarting United States plans to oust Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad. Third, the successful military campaign against the rebel forces and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) demonstrated Russia's combat capabilities and advanced weaponry, attracting the attention of potential customers.

For Russia, the Syrian war was not just an economic opportunity to garner revenue, but a means to gain and maintain a future political and military strategic foothold in the Middle East region. "Ever since the days of Catherine the Great, political elites in Moscow have coveted their own dominion – or at least, a sphere of influence – in the Middle East and the Mediterranean."²⁹ In this respect, Russia has furthered its goal to increase its influence and boost its great power image through its success as a major arms producer and exporter.³⁰

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- ¹ Thierry Mallaret, *Conversion of the Defense Industry in the Former Soviet Union* (New York: Westview Press, 1992), 14.
- ² Ibid, 25.
- ³ Alec Luhn, "Russia's campaign in Syria leads to arms sale windfall." *The Guardian*. 29 Mar 2016.
- ⁴ Antonio Sanchez-Andres, "Arms Exports and Restructuring in the Russian Defense Industry," *Europe-Asia Studies* 56, no. 5 (July 2004): 671.
- ⁵ Stephen Blank, "The Dynamics of Russian Weapons Sales to China," Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, March 1997.
- ⁶ Antonio Sanchez-Andres, "Arms Exports and Restructuring in the Russian Defense Industry," *Europe-Asia Studies* 56, no. 5 (July 2004): 689.
- ⁷ Ibid, 695.
- ⁸ Ibid, 670.
- ⁹ Ibid, 671.
- ¹⁰ Igor Ivanov, "Rearmament," *Izvestiia*, December 26, 2000.
- ¹¹ Antonio Sanchez-Andres, "Arms Exports and Restructuring in the Russian Defense Industry," *Europe-Asia Studies* 56, no. 5 (July 2004): 676.
- ¹² Nabi Abdullaev, "Russia Revamps Industrial Strategy: Arms-Export Agency Seeks Sway Beyond Defense Sectors," *Defense News*, 3 July 2006.
- ¹³ Thierry Mallaret, *Conversion of the Defense Industry in the Former Soviet Union* (New York: Westview Press, 1992), 25.
- ¹⁴ V.C. Sergey, "This is Rosoboronexport. NATO's Nations and Partners for Peace", (2), 73.
- ¹⁵ Ibid, 75.
- ¹⁶ Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 15.
- ¹⁷ Ishaan Tharoor, "Why Russia is in Syria", *Worldviews*. 11 Sep 2015.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Mansur Mirovalev, "Syria's war: A showroom for Russian arms sales", *Aljazeera*. 6 Apr 2016.
- ²⁰ Alec Luhn, "Russia's campaign in Syria leads to arms sale windfall." *The Guardian*. 29 Mar 2016.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 15.
- ²⁵ Meeting of the Commission for Military Technology Cooperation with Foreign States. Minutes. July 2, 2012.
- ²⁶ S. Blank and E. Levitsky. "Geostrategic aims of the Russian arms trade in East Asia and the Middle East. *Defense Studies* (Vol 15, 2015), 70.
- ²⁷ Aleksandr Sizonenko, "Latin America: A Fixture in Russian Diplomacy," *International Affairs*, Vol. 53, No. 1, 2007, 133.
- ²⁸ Eduardo Crawley, "Russia and Latin America: What Kind of Rapprochement," *Latinnews*, Southcom Expert Papers, July 2006.
- ²⁹ Ishaan Tharoor, "Why Russia is in Syria", *Worldviews*. 11 Sep 2015.
- ³⁰ Mansur Mirovalev, "Syria's war: A showroom for Russian arms sales", *Aljazeera*, 6 Apr 2016.

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